

FROM THE COMMODITY TO CAPITAL: HEGEL'S DIALECTIC IN MARX'S 'CAPITAL'

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THE DIALECTIC IN LENIN AND MARX

Lenin

It is well known that on reading Hegel's *Logic* late in 1914 Lenin was so profoundly impressed by the impact which he now discovered it had made on Marx that he wrote,

‘It is impossible completely to understand Marx's *Capital*, and especially its first chapter, without having thoroughly studied and understood the whole of Hegel's *Logic*.’

Then a startling conclusion: ‘Consequently, half a century later none of the Marxists understood Marx!!’ (Lenin, 1972, p. 180).

Today, over a century later, this statement has a special significance. In Lenin's day, the Second International had more or less explicitly shifted the philosophical and scientific premises of Marxism in directions quite distant from its Hegelian origins — towards biological evolutionism (Kautsky), varieties of neo-Kantianism (Bernstein among others), and even, through Max Adler, the positivism of Comte (cf. Goldmann, 1959, pp. 280-302). In our own, contemporary period the publication of Della Volpe's *Logica come scienza positiva* (its original title of the fifties) inaugurated a roughly similar reaction. Conscious repudiation of the dialectic, of the enormous weight of Hegel's method in Marx's development and thus in the formation of Marx's theory, became a fundamental and unifying characteristic of postwar ‘Western Marxism’. As in the nascent period of reformism, late in the nineteenth century, so now, in its declining phase, in the sixties, this critique of ‘metaphysics’ (Della Volpe, 1969) or of ‘illusion’ (Althusser, 1969) *could only* take the form of a bizarre philosophical eclecticism ranging across the most divergent and logically incompatible tendencies: from forms of empiricism more (Colletti) or less (Della Volpe) sympathetic to Kant, or simply reflecting the hostility of Positivists to any philosophical connection (Timpanaro), to a revitalised Spinozist rationalism (Althusser). As Althusser's own acknowledgment suggests (1969, pp. 37-38), Della Volpe was the *major* figure in this belated movement of reaction. The most serious specific consequence of Della Volpe's attack on Hegel was its ‘experimentalist’ recasting of the dialectic into a conception of science, and of

scientific method, strikingly close to Popper's neo-empiricism.¹ When he turned to *Capital* with this underlying conception of the 'reciprocity of fact and theory', or of induction and deduction, or of reason and experience, Della Volpe would not only ascribe to Marx a *labour* theory of value, but see in the latter a scientific 'hypothesis' which the real development of 'monopoly capitalism' had finally confirmed as true (Della Volpe, 1969, p. 201). Of course, it was with a similar philosophy of science and from similar premises that Popper himself set out to argue the precise opposite.²

Lenin's statement thus takes on a special importance today. The *Logic*, he says, is fundamental to a correct understanding of Marx's *Capital*, and 'especially of its first chapter' which contains the theory of value.

On the other hand, how well did Lenin himself understand the *Logic*? His *Notebooks* are full of question-marks, of doubts, for Lenin is actually reading Hegel for the first time, with a philosophical past of his own, dominated by a form of empiricism. One group of passages in particular reveals a quite incomplete penetration of the movement of the dialectic. For example, in the concluding sentence of his summary of Hegel's small *Logic*, Lenin writes,

'Cf. concerning the question of Essence versus Appearance

— price and value

— demand and supply versus *Wert* (= *krystallisierte Arbeit*)

— wages and the price of labour-power' (Lenin, 1972, p. 320).

This says, value = 'essence', price = 'appearance'. Now in the price-form value appears either as pure contingency or as a merely imaginary relationship (cf. *Capital*, I, p. 197) so that the equations suggested identify appearance with *contingency*. A passage from the essay on 'Dialectics' shows that this is in fact how Lenin understood the matter. In any proposition of language,

'already we have the contingent and the necessary, the appearance and the essence; for when we say: John is a man, Fido is a dog ... we *disregard* a number of attributes as *contingent*; we separate the essence from the appearance, and counterpose the one to the other.' (Lenin, 1972, p. 361.)

In his 'Conspectus' of the *Logic*, in the summary of Hegel's section on Appearance (in the major *Logic* this starts with a very short sentence, 'Essence must appear', *Science of Logic*, p. 479), Lenin criticises Hegel in the following terms:

‘The shifting of the world in itself further and further *from* the world of appearances-that is what is so far still not to be seen in Hegel.’ (1972, p. 153. All emphases Lenin’s.)

And this makes sense. If the world of appearances is a world of pure contingency, if we arrive at the ‘essence’ of the matter by ‘disregarding’ its contingent attributes, then it follows that it is the task of scientific cognition to carry through this ‘separation’, to ‘*shift* the world in itself *further and further from* the world of appearances’. As Lenin correctly notes, Hegel *does not do this*.

The conception that Lenin holds to has two consequences. Firstly, it sees the dialectic as a study of the *opposition* of essence and appearance. In his own words,

‘Dialectics is the study of the opposition of the thing-in-itself, of the essence ... from the appearance.’ (1972, p. 253.)

Secondly, this false conception of the dialectic implies something quite specific for the *method* of scientific cognition, and this too is quite plain from the *Notebooks*.

‘Hegel is completely right as against Kant. Thought proceeding from the concrete to the abstract-provided it is correct ... does not get away from the truth but comes closer to it. The abstraction of matter, of a law of nature, *the abstraction of value*, etc., in short *all scientific* (correct, serious, not absurd) *abstractions reflect nature more deeply, truly and completely*. From living perception to *abstract* thought, and *from this* to practice-such is the dialectical path of the cognition of truth ...’ (1972, p. 171) (Emphasis mine)

But how from *abstract* thought or from the ‘abstraction of value’ does one move straight to practice? This is not a question Lenin asks himself at this point. On the other hand, in *Hegel*, he finds a more subtle, more complex movement, and this puzzles him:

‘it is strikingly evident that *Hegel sometimes passes from the abstract to the concrete ... and sometimes the other way round ...* Is not this the inconsistency of an idealist? ... Or are there deeper reasons?’ (1972, p. 318.)

The ‘inconsistency’ lies not in Hegel, but in Lenin. For on the one hand, as the *Notebooks* show, he realises that for Hegel essence ‘must appear’, that appearance itself is essential (cf. 1972, p. 148, p. 253), but on the other hand, he regards appearances as pure contingency, as that from which we ‘abstract’ so as to arrive at ‘essence’, as a world apart from and opposed, or counterposable to essence.

Hegel in Marx

There are countless references to problems of scientific method scattered across the pages of Marx's later work. To draw some of these together here in a form that recapitulates their underlying conceptions: *firstly*, there is a methodological reference that is basic to any understanding of the architecture of *Capital*, namely, the distinction Marx repeatedly draws between 'capital in general' and 'many capitals' (cf. Rosdolsky, 1968, Volume I, p. 61 ff.). The former refers to the 'inner nature of capital', to its 'essential character' (*Grundrisse*, p. 414), and is also called 'the simple concept of capital' (ibid.); by contrast, 'many capitals or competition of capitals, entails a study of capital 'in its *reality*' (*Grundrisse*, p. 684 note), or in its 'concrete' aspects as they appear reflected on the *surface of society*, in the 'actual movement' of capitals (*Capital*, III, p. 25). So in the first place the investigation of capitalist economy is broadly stratified into two levels which contrapose the 'essential character' of capital to its 'concrete' or 'actual' superficial movements. But *secondly*, the investigation itself is a *movement* from one level to the other, from essence to concreteness. In the Preface to the first edition (1867) of *Capital* I, Marx writes that in the analysis of 'economic forms', i.e. of social phenomena as such, the 'power of abstraction' must replace a directly experimental, hence empirical, relation to the object. In what does the power of abstraction consist, however? About this the passage in question leaves no room for doubt. It consists in our ability to identify a *point of departure* for the movement from one level to the other, and a point of departure which will be simultaneously the *foundation* of that movement. For Marx here introduces the notion of a 'cell-form' (*Capital*, I, p. 90), which he identifies with Hegel's 'in itself (*An-sich*, or essence) in the first edition form of Chapter One (cf. Zeleny, 1973, p. 78, n. 8, for the passage). The movement from the cell-form to the concrete is logically continuous, so that, in approaching the concrete forms in which capital appears on the surface of society, we do not abandon the sphere of essential relations as if we were moving across into new territory; rather, we now investigate those very relations in 'their' forms of appearance, i.e. in the forms determined within their own logical movement, as part of this movement.

These intermediate levels of the logical process, which connect abstract and concrete, are as essential as essence in its abstract and simple cell-form. Marx's constant reference to these intermediate levels or 'terms' or 'stages', or to the 'connecting links' (*Theories*, 3, p. 453, 2, p. 174, *Capital*, I, p. 421), implies a *logic of derivation* (of 'deduction' in the broad sense) which is distinct from the pure deductive method of axiomatic systems (on this see Zeleny, 1973, p. 75 ff., p. 141 ff.). The concrete is derived by stages, from the abstract. Where this process of dialectical-logical derivation collapses, as it does in Classical Economy, Marx refers to 'forced abstractions', to the direct subordination of the concrete to the abstract (*Theories*, 1, p. 89, p. 92; 2, p. 164 f., p. 437; 3, p. 87).

Thirdly, in the famous introduction of 1857 (*Grundrisse*, p. 100 ff.), the movement of essence from abstract to concrete is also described as a journey from the simple to the combined. The movement of derivation of forms within a framework defined by its logical continuity is thus also a process of ‘combination’, of the ‘concentration’ of many ‘determinations’ into a ‘rich totality’ which reproduces the concreteness of reality no longer simply as something that impinges confusedly on perception but as something rationally comprehended. These ‘determinations’ are only the forms derived in the movement of essence as the *form-determinations of essence* (cf. Rubin, 1972, p. 37 ff.).

Finally, the entire process by which the concrete is reproduced in thought as something rationally comprehended is described in places by Marx as the ‘dialectical development’ of the ‘concept’ of capital, and all moments within this movement which are derivable as essential determinations, including, of course, the forms of appearance, no matter how illusory they may be, count as moments (forms, relations) ‘corresponding to their concept’ (e.g. *Capital*, III, p. 141). (This is why, despite its illusory and deceptive character, Marx can call the wage-form ‘one of the *essential* mediating forms of capitalist relations of production’, *Results*, p. 1064.)

It is obvious that the methodological references express a consistent and internally unified conception which it is impossible to grasp without reference to the dialectic, that is, to what can now be formally defined as a specific, *non-classical logical type* of scientific thought, a form of scientific reasoning and proof distinct from generalising inductivism, deductive-axiomatic methods, or any combination of these supposedly characteristic of a ‘scientific method in general’, e.g. Della Volpe’s hypothetico-deductive method.

The point can also be put in these terms: it is impossible to grasp Marx’s conception of scientific method outside the framework of Hegel’s *Logic*. This is not to claim that, like Lassalle, he simply ‘applied an abstract ready-made system of logic’ (*Selected Correspondence*, p. 123) to the phenomena of capitalist economy. The claim is a different one: the method that Marx followed was a method ‘which *Hegel* discovered’ (*Selected Correspondence*, p. 121). It was Hegel who first enunciated the conception of a point of departure which is simultaneously the foundation of the movement which it initiates (*Science of Logic*, p. 71). For Hegel this was only conceivable because the principle that forms the beginning is not something ‘dead’, something fixed and static, but something ‘self-moving’ (Hegel, 1966, p. 104). Hegel’s great announcement in the ‘Preface’ to the *Phenomenology* is the conception of ‘substance’ as ‘subject’, or the conception of a ‘self-developing, self-evolving substance’, where the term ‘substance’ can be taken in its classical, Cartesian sense to mean ‘that which requires only itself for its existence’. (The importance of this idea for Hegel’s work and for its relation to Marx is drawn out by Zeleny, 1973, p. 47 f., p. 98 f.)

As the ‘process that engenders its own moments and runs through them’ (Hegel, 1966, p. 108) this substance-subject is what Hegel calls *das Wesen*, essence. Essence cannot be said to be something ‘before or in its movement’, and this movement ‘has no substrate on which it runs its course’ (*Science of Logic*, p. 448). Rather, essence is the movement through which it ‘posits itself, ‘reflects itself into itself, as the totalising unity of ‘essence and form’ (*Science of Logic*, p. 449). Conversely,

‘the question cannot therefore be asked, *how form is added to essence*, for it is only the reflection of essence into essence itself ...’ (*Science of Logic*, p. 449-50)

Moreover, if form is *immanent*, or

‘if form is taken as equal to essence, then it is a misunderstanding to suppose that cognition can be satisfied with the ‘in itself or with essence, that it can dispense with form, that the basic principle from which we start (*Grundsatz*) renders superfluous the *realisation of essence* or the *development of form*. Precisely because *form is as essential to essence* as essence to itself, essence must not be grasped and expressed merely as essence ... but as form also, and with the entire wealth of developed form. Only then is it grasped and expressed as something *real*.’ (Hegel, 1966, p. 50)

In this decisive passage Hegel says essence must realise itself, or ‘work itself out’, and this it can only do through the ‘activity of form’ (*Science of Logic*, p. 453). Only as this self-totalising unity of itself and form does it become something ‘real’ (*wirkliches*). Otherwise, as immediate substance, substance not mediated through its self-movement, essence remains something abstract and so one-sided and incomplete. It remains something basically *untrue*, for, as Hegel goes on to say, in the passage cited above, ‘the truth is *totality*’ (Hegel, 1966, p. 50), a fusion of essence and form, universal and particular, or the universal drawing out of itself the wealth of particularity.

It is interesting that in a terminology that is almost indistinguishable from Hegel’s, Marx articulates an identical conception as early as his *Dissertation*. For Hegel’s argument can be summarised in his own words as follows: ‘*Appearance is itself essential to essence*’ (Hegel, 1970, p. 21). Now in the *Dissertation* Marx argues that although they shared the same general principles (Atomist), Democritus and Epicurus evolved diametrically opposed conceptions of knowledge and attitudes towards it. Democritus maintained that ‘sensuous appearance does not belong to the Atoms themselves. It is not *objective appearance* but *subjective semblance (Schein)*. The true principles are the atom and the void ...’ (Marx, 1975, p. 39). So for Democritus ‘the principle *does not enter into the appearance*, remains without reality and existence’, and the real world, the world he perceives, is then ‘*torn away from the principle*, left in its own independent reality’ (Marx, 1975, p. 40). In Hegel’s terms, for Democritus the

Atom is devoid of form, has no form of appearance, so that the world of appearances (*Erscheinungen*) necessarily degenerates into a world of pure illusion (*Schein*). ‘The Atom remains for Democritus a *pure and abstract category, a hypothesis*’ (Marx, 1975, p. 73. All emphases in this paragraph mine). Or, ‘in Democritus there is no *realisation of the principle itself*’ (Marx, 1975, p. 56 ff.). On the other hand, if Democritus transforms the world we perceive into pure illusion, Epicurus regards it as ‘objective appearance’.

‘Epicurus was the first to grasp appearance as appearance that is, as alienation of the essence’ (Marx, 1975, p. 64).

‘In Epicurus the consequence of the principle itself will be presented’ (id. p. 56).

Or for Epicurus the Atom is not a simply abstract and hypothetical determination, it is something ‘active’, a principle that ‘realises itself’.

The Dialectic as Critique of Bourgeois Economy

The conception of Democritus is dominated by the following contradiction: what is true, the principle, remains devoid of any form of appearance, hence something purely abstract and hypothetical; on the other hand, the world of appearances, divorced from any principle, is left as an independent reality. It is not difficult to see that in the critique which Marx developed many years later, classical and vulgar economy emerged as the transfigured expressions of the poles of this contradiction. So Marx would write,

‘By classical political economy I mean all the economists who ... have investigated the real internal relations of bourgeois economy as opposed to the vulgar economists who only flounder around within their forms of appearance’ (*Capital*, I, p. 174. Translation modified).

‘Vulgar economy feels especially at home in the alienated external appearances of economic relations’ (*Capital*, III, p. 796. Translation modified),

whereas classical economy, which investigates those relations themselves, seeks to grasp them ‘*in opposition to their different forms of appearance*’. Classical economy says, the appearances are pure semblance (*Schein*), only the principles are true. So

‘it is not interested in evolving the different forms through their inner genesis (*die verschiedenen Formen genetisch zu entwickeln*) but tries to reduce them to their unity by the analytic method’ (*Theories*, 3, p. 500. Translation modified).

Again, classical economy ‘holds instinctively to the law’, ‘it tries to rescue the law from the contradictions of appearance’, from ‘experience based on immediate appearance’,

while vulgar economy relies here ‘as elsewhere on the mere semblance as against the law of appearance (*gegen das Gesetz der Erscheinung*)’ (*Capital*, I, p. 421 f.), that is, as against the notion of appearances as ‘essential’ (*Science of Logic*, p. 500 ff.).

In short, as in the atomism of Democritus, so in bourgeois economy essence and appearance *fall apart*. It follows that classical economy which ‘holds to the law’, the principle or essence or inner relations, comprehends this only abstractly as a principle that remains ‘without reality and existence’, as an essence without form, as dead substance or *hypothesis*. In Hegel’s terms, its ‘principle’, the Ricardian labour theory of value, forms an Abstract Identity incapable of passing over into a Concrete Totality, hence into something true. Ricardo

‘abstracts from what he considers to be accidental’,

or the appearances are of no concern to him, his is an essence that can dispose of form.

‘Another method would be to present the *real process* in which both what is to Ricardo a merely accidental movement, but what is constant and real, and its law, the average relation, appear as *equally essential*’. (GKP p. 803. Emphasis mine.)

This method is Marx’s own, the conception of Epicurus in Antiquity or of Hegel in the modern world.

It follows that the ‘abstraction of value’ cannot by itself ‘reflect nature ... truly and completely’, as Lenin supposes. As the abstract universal, it is something simple and undeveloped, this form of simplicity is its one-sidedness, it remains a principle that has still to ‘realise itself, to become ‘active’. And this it can only do by ‘entering into appearance’, determining itself in appearance or in the whole ‘wealth of developed form’. For to trace the movement through which the principle (essence) enters into appearance and acquires reality and existence, is precisely to ‘evolve the different forms through their inner genesis’, it is to develop conceptually the movement which Marx calls ‘the real process of acquiring shape’ (*Theories*, 3, p. 500, *der wirkliche Gestaltungsprozess*).

But finally, it is just as important to bear in mind that this movement through which the forms emerge is only the ‘reflection of essence into itself’, essence as a movement of reflection or mediation. Henryk Grossmann’s example is a good illustration of this. Both in his major study (Grossmann, 1970) and in his critique of Luxemburg’s understanding of the Reproduction Schemes (Grossmann, 1971, pp. 45-74), Grossmann saw in the return to the level of appearances or to the concrete, both the chief task of scientific investigation and the main thrust of the method. (Luxemburg was criticised for allegedly confusing different stages in the process of abstraction, that is, for

supposing that a *value-schema* could explain phenomena which presupposed regulation by *prices*.) On the other hand, Grossmann himself proposed an extremely one-sided understanding of Marx's method in *Capital*, precisely in failing to see in the return to the concrete a process defined by logical continuity. Grossmann writes,

‘The empirically given world of appearances forms the object of investigation. *This, however, is too complicated to be known directly.* We can approach it only by stages. To this end *numerous simplifying assumptions are made*, and these enable us to grasp the object of knowledge in its inner structure.’ (Grossmann, 1970, p. vi. Emphases mine.)

Grossmann thus sees in the dialectic a ‘method of approximation to reality’ and in doing so he recasts the relation between abstract and concrete as a progressive ‘correction’ that again ‘takes into account the elements of reality which were initially disregarded’ (ibid.). Because this completely ignores the law of motion of the enquiry itself, the conception of substance as self-developing or of the essential movement, Grossmann has no means of explaining on what basis other than pure intuition Marx could select the specific assumptions defining a given level of abstraction. If the ‘simplifying assumptions’ are the main thing, then, through an opposite route, we are back with Lenin's idea that we arrive at the ‘essence’ as opposed to the “appearances’ by a process of ‘abstracting from’. We ‘separate’ essence from appearance through the series of simplifying assumptions we make, then, reversing the movement, abandon these assumptions step by step so as to arrive at the appearances again. Or, in Hegel's words,

‘the procedure of the finite cognition of the understanding here is to take up again, equally externally, what it has left out in its creation of the universal by a process of abstraction.’ (*Science of Logic*, p. 830.)

Indeed, the true logic of this conception is evident in one writer (Himmelman, 1974, pp. 41-50) who, starting with the notion of appearances as the pure ‘other’ of essence, drives himself into the conclusion that Marx is concerned with *two different* objects of analysis, one ‘abstract-sociological’ and the other ‘concrete-economic’.

COMMODITY AND CAPITAL. THE PROBLEM OF THE BEGINNING OF *CAPITAL*

The ‘Beginning’ in the Literature on *Capital*.

‘Beginnings are always difficult in all sciences. The understanding of the first chapter, especially the section that contains the analysis of commodities, will therefore present the greatest difficulty.’ (*Capital*, I, p. 89.)

No section of *Capital* gave Marx as much trouble as its beginning. Why could he not just begin with Part Two, the transformation of money into capital (as Althusser asks the French readers of *Capital* to do)? Quite clearly because the whole understanding of *what capital is*, of its relation to social labour, depends crucially on the exposition of the theory of value. (The sense in which ‘value’ is used here and throughout this essay will be clarified in the next section.) As Marx says about capital, ‘In the concept of value its secret is betrayed’ (*Grundrisse*, p. 776).

Before turning to an analysis of the structure of the beginning, it would be useful to look briefly at some of the conceptions current in the literature. The most widespread and manifestly incorrect understanding is the one proposed by Meek. Misinterpreting Engels’ remarks on the relation of the ‘logical’ and ‘historical’ methods *in the critique of political economy* to be a statement about the relation between the theory and the history of capitalism as such, Meek argues that Marx’s logical procedure in *Capital* reflects the actual historical process of the coming-into-being of capital. The consequence of this mistaken conception is twofold. On the one hand, Marx is supposed to begin *Capital* with a ‘society of simple commodity producers’; however, because the historical existence of a society of this type is problematic, Marx is supposed to start with a *fiction*, in the fictionalist philosophies of science sense (i.e. a sort of device). So Meek writes,

‘Marx’s postulate of an abstract pre-capitalist society ... was not a myth, but rather mythodology’ (Meek, 1973, p. 303 f.),

not science fiction but scientific fiction. The second consequence may be stated as follows:

‘In so far as Marx’s logical transition in *Capital* (from the commodity relation as such to the ‘capitalistically modified’ form of this relation) is presented by him as the ‘mirror image’ of a historical transition (from ‘simple’ to ‘capitalist’ commodity production), *Marx’s procedure becomes formally similar to that of Adam Smith and Ricardo*, who also believed that the real essence of capitalism could be revealed by analysing the changes which would take place if capitalism suddenly impinged upon *some kind of abstract pre-capitalist society*.’ (Meek, 1973, p. xv. Emphasis mine.)

This is a fairly neat way of reabsorbing *Capital* into the flaccid methodological tradition which Marx himself severely criticised in three whole volumes (the volumes which compose *Theories of Surplus-Value*). We shall see later, from Marx’s own statements, how in this conception, and in the disguised form of supposedly valid scientific ‘fictions’, Meek only ascribes to Marx his own totally fictitious conception of science.^{[3](#)}

Secondly, passing from the stolid and unshakeable empiricism of the British tradition in philosophy, to the more delicate, but also more hesitant empiricism of the Della Volpe school, there is Colletti who dissolves the dialectic into the ‘circle of induction and deduction’. That is, into a twofold process in which the concept is both logically first and empirically or inductively, second. Without explicitly endorsing hypotheticism, Colletti states the conclusion of this conception as follows: ‘one must bear in mind that implicit in the logical process is a process of reality which works in the opposite direction’ (Colletti, 1973, p. 121) and which makes the concept a *result* of the *observation* of reality.

This conception of the twofold process is translated into an interpretation of the beginning of *Capital* in the following terms-the first moment in the logical process or chain of ‘deductive reasoning’ forms likewise the last in the real process, or the chain of ‘induction’. What is this moment, however? When we turn to the analysis itself, it is a striking fact that no *stable* identification is evolved.

Passage one:

‘*Exchange-value* presents itself to us in two different respects: on the one hand, as the most comprehensive and broadest generality from which all the other categories are deduced and from which a scientific exposition must begin; on the other hand, as an objective characteristic, as the last (in the inductive chain) and therefore *most superficial* and abstract characteristic ... of the concrete object in question.’ (Colletti, 1973. p. 126. Emphasis mine.)

Passage two:

‘The work begins its analysis by studying the ‘*form of value*’, the ‘*commodity form*’ ... ’ (Colletti, 1973, p. 126.)

from which the other forms (money, capital) are derived.

Passage three:

‘The work develops, together with the deductive process descending from the *commodity* to money, and from the latter to capital, as an inductive process going back from the generic or secondary features of the object in question to its specific or primary ones ... the expository formula commodity-money-capital, shows itself to be also the exposition best-suited to the procedure by which analysis gradually penetrates the object in question, *departing from the non-essential* or generic aspects and going back to the fundamental or specific ones, *from effects to causes*

and (in short) from the most superficial phenomena to the real basis implicit in them.’ (Colletti, 1973, p. 127 f.)

Throughout this exposition, in other words, the commodity = the commodity-form and both (individual commodity and commodity-form) are indifferently and variously characterised as ‘the most comprehensive generality’, ‘the universal’, ‘most superficial aspect’, ‘secondary feature’, ‘non-essential aspect’, ‘effect’. So in Colletti’s understanding, the point of departure in a logical (or logico-deductive) process can actually be something ‘non-essential’ and yet something which *somehow* takes us to that which *is* ‘essential’ (‘fundamental’). As he says, ‘departing *from the non-essential*’ we arrive at capital. Or what this entire analysis argues is simply this: the essence of capital does not lie in the *commodity-form* (that is, in *value* in the definition to be given later) because the *commodity* is, after all, only a ‘phenomenal form’ of capital and as such a merely secondary and subordinate aspect.

Finally, even an obvious sympathy for the dialectic is not a sufficient condition for grasping the structure of the beginning, as the case of Nicolaus shows. According to him,

‘It is this category, the commodity, which forms the starting point of ... *Capital I* (1867). It is a beginning which is at once concrete, material, almost tangible’,

here note the suggested synonyms for ‘concrete’,

‘as well as historically specific to capitalist production ... Unlike Hegel’s *Logic*, and unlike Marx’s own initial attempts earlier, this beginning begins not with a pure, indeterminate, eternal and universal abstraction, but rather with a compound, determinate, delimited and *concrete whole* — ‘*a concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse*’.’ (Nicolaus, 1973, p. 36. Emphasis mine.)

This is really quite strange, for in the very sentence from which Nicolaus quotes Marx, Marx makes it clear that

‘the concrete is concrete because it is the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse. It appears in the process of thinking, therefore, ... *as a result, not as a point of departure*.’ (*Grundrisse*, p. 101)

The commodity which forms the starting-point is thus by no stretch of one’s dialectical imagination, a ‘concrete whole’ in the sense suggested by Nicolaus. (The underlying confusion here is the same as Colletti’s.) Secondly, because Nicolaus somewhat crudely contraposes ‘abstract universal’ to ‘concrete’ (Zeleny, 1973, chapter 4, is also prone to

this sort of argument), and discerns in the beginning of *Capital* only this ‘concrete’, he is forced into a conclusion which, *if true*, would render the whole motion of the dialectic something absolutely incomprehensible. This is the conclusion that

‘the notion that the path of investigation must proceed from simple, general, abstract relations towards complex, particular wholes *no longer appeared to him* (Marx) ... as ‘obviously the scientifically correct procedure’.’ (Nicolaus, 1973, p. 38. Emphasis mine.)

From the fact that Marx does not begin with a *historically indeterminate* abstract, production in general, Nicolaus concludes that Marx does not begin with an abstract at all.

It is obvious from these three examples (Meek, Colletti, Nicolaus) that there is a considerable amount of confusion regarding the beginning, even when everyone agrees that the commodity is the starting-point.

How Marx Begins *Capital*.

‘Compared with your earlier form of presentation, the progress in the sharpness of dialectical exposition is quite striking.’ (Engels to Marx, 16.6.67.)

(a) *A Summary of the Argument.*

It would be good to summarise the general argument of the section in advance for the sake of simplicity. The total structure (*Gesamtaufbau*) of *Capital* is best understood in terms of an image that Marx himself uses at one point. Namely, if it is seen as an ‘expanding curve’ or spiral-movement composed of specific cycles of abstraction. Each cycle of abstraction, and thus the curve as a whole, begins and ends with the Sphere of *Circulation* (the realm of appearances), which is finally, at the end of the entire movement, itself determined specifically as the Sphere of the *Competition of Capitals*. The first specific cycle in *Capital*, the one which initiates the entire movement of the curve, starts with Circulation as the *immediate, abstract* appearance of the total process of capital, that is, it starts with ‘Simple Circulation’. As an immediate appearance of this process, as its *Schein*, Simple Circulation *presupposes* this process, which is capital in its totality. The first cycle then moves dialectically from Simple Circulation, or what Marx calls the individual commodity, to capital. This movement will be called the ‘dialectical-logical derivation of the concept of capital’. Methodologically, it is itself decomposable into specific phases: an initial phase of Analysis which takes us from the individual commodity to the concept of value, and a subsequent phase of Synthesis which, starting from value, derives the concept of capital through the process Hegel called ‘the development of form’. Capital then emerges through this movement as

‘nothing else but a value-form of the organisation of productive forces’ (Ilyenkov, 1977, p. 85). In the return to the Sphere of Circulation which concludes cycle 1, initiates cycle 2, the individual commodity from which we started is now ‘posited’, that is, established dialectically, as a form of appearance (*Erscheinungsform*) of capital, and Circulation is posited as both presupposition and result of the Immediate Process of Production. The dialectical status of the Sphere of Circulation thus shifts from being the immediate appearance of a process ‘behind it’ (*Schein*) to being the posited form of appearance (*Erscheinung*) of this process. (Cf. for example, *Grundrisse*, p. 358, *Theories* 3, p. 112, *Results* p. 949 ff.)

(b) *Capital as Presupposition of the Commodity.*

‘In the completed bourgeois system ... everything posited is also a presupposition, this is the case with every organic system.’ (*Grundrisse*, p. 278.)

In the *Grundrisse* Marx sketches a series of short anticipatory drafts of the plan of his work as a whole. They are, of course more in the nature of notes which he will revise from time to time. In one of these he writes,

‘In the first section, where exchange-values, money, prices are looked at, commodities always appear as already present ... We know that they (commodities) express aspects of social production, but the latter itself is the presupposition. However, they are *not posited* in this character ...’ (*Grundrisse*, p. 227, Nicolaus’ translation slightly modified, Marx’s emphasis.)

Here Marx says that at the beginning of the entire movement of investigation the commodity already presupposes social production (capital) of which it is only an ‘aspect’, or determination, but it is not yet posited as such an aspect. That is, it has still to be *established dialectically* or dialectico-logically as a determination of the total process of capital. Secondly, this world of commodities that confronts us on the surface of bourgeois society ‘points beyond itself towards the economic relations which are posited as relations of production. The internal structure of production therefore forms the second section ...’ (ibid.). In his original draft of the 1859 *Critique*, reprinted in the German edition of the *Grundrisse*, Marx returns to this idea and develops it more explicitly:

‘An analysis of the specific form of the division of labour, of the conditions of production which are its basis, or of the economic relations into which those conditions resolve, would show that *the whole system of bourgeois production is presupposed* before exchange-value appears as the simple point of departure on the surface.’ (GKP, p. 907. Emphasis mine.)

As the form which confronts us immediately on the surface of society, the commodity *as such* is our point of departure. But this simple commodity, the point of departure, already presupposes a specific form of the social division of labour, it presupposes the bourgeois mode of production in its totality. On the other hand, at the beginning itself, the commodity has still to be posited as only an ‘aspect’ or form of appearance of the total process of capital.

Because capital in its totality is the presupposition, when he starts Chapter One of *Capital* Marx must explicitly *refer to* this presupposition. And that is exactly what he does. He says,

‘The wealth of societies *in which the capitalist mode of production prevails* appears as an immense collection of commodities; the individual commodity appears as its elementary form.’ (*Capital*, I, p. 125. Emphasis mine.)

So the very first sentence of *Capital* makes it quite clear that *capital* is presupposed.

One consequence of this is obvious. The conceptual regime of Part One, Volume One is not some ‘abstract pre-capitalist society’ of ‘simple commodity producers’, it is the Sphere of Simple Circulation, or the circulation of commodities as such, and we start with this as the process that is ‘*immediately present on the surface of bourgeois society*’. (*Grundrisse*, p. 255, emphasis mine), we start with it as a reflected sphere of the total process of capital which, however, has still to be determined *as reflected*, i.e. still to be *posited*. When we examine the simple commodity, or the commodity as such, we only examine *capital* in its most superficial or immediate aspect. As Marx says,

‘We proceed from the commodity as *capitalist production in its simplest form*.’ (*Results*, p. 1060, emphasis mine.)

Indeed, capital ‘*must form the starting-point as well as the finishing point*’ (*Grundrisse*, p. 107, emphasis mine), but as the starting-point capital is taken in its ‘immediate being’ or as it appears immediately on the surface of society.

It is, therefore, difficult to understand how anything except the most shallow and hasty reading of Marx’s *Capital* could have led to the kind of view proposed by Meek and so many other professional expounders of Marx. The ‘abstract pre-capitalist society’ that Marx is supposed to have started with is not a fiction that Marx consciously uses in the tradition of certain medieval conceptions of science, but a fiction that ‘mythodologists’ unconsciously tend to elaborate.

(c) *The Structure of Marx’s Concept of Value.*

Also in the remarkably clear original draft of the *Critique*, Marx writes,

‘Simple circulation is an abstract sphere of the total process of production of capital which *through its own determinations* becomes identifiable as a *moment*, a mere form of appearance of a deeper process that underlies it.’ (GKP p. 922 f. emphasis mine.)

This means (i) that the individual commodity contains immediately within itself determinations that can be drawn out of it. ‘Our investigation ... begins with the analysis of the commodity’ (*Capital*, I, p. 125). The individual commodity is a ‘concrete’ in the specific dialectical sense that it comprises a *relation within itself* (*Science of Logic*, p. 75). ‘As concrete, it is *differentiated within itself*’ (*Science of Logic*, p. 830), hence something analysable. However, (ii) in drawing out the differentiated determinations that lie within the given object, analysis only initiates, or sets in motion, a process that allows us to *return to* the commodity and identify it now as a ‘moment’, a form of appearance, of capital. The immediacy from which we started then becomes what Hegel calls ‘a *mediated* immediacy’ (*Science of Logic*, p. 99).

Through the movement of analysis Marx draws out the inner determinations of the commodity regarded as a concrete, immediate representation. These determinations are, of course, use-value and exchange-value. *In the first instance* these differentiated determinations are merely a ‘diversity’ (*Science of Logic*, p. 830), or in Marx’s words, (cited Berger, 1974, p. 102, note 37), use-value and exchange-value are simply ‘abstract opposites’ that split apart in mutual indifference.

Now to say that ‘through its own determinations’ the simple commodity must become identifiable as a form of appearance of capital is to say that the analysis of the commodity, the drawing out of its inner determinations, must *establish the dialectical-logical basis* for the derivation of capital, whose own further determination or development will then ‘mediate’ the immediacy of the commodity as such. *This* the analysis of the commodity can only do if it takes up *specifically that determination* which allows us to pass dialectico-logically to a notion like capital. This ‘use-value’ does not do, because it is the commodity’s ‘material side which the *most disparate epochs of production* ... have in common’ (*Grundrisse*, p. 881). Marx begins therefore with ‘exchange-value’, taking this as the only basis on which he can begin to penetrate the social properties of the commodity.

These properties then appear initially as a sort of ‘content’ ‘hidden within’ their ‘form of appearance’, exchange-value. Insofar as Marx, both in Section 1 and later, calls this ‘content’ ‘value’ (cf. *Capital*, I, p. 139: ‘We started from exchange-value ... in order to track down the value that lay hidden within it’), it is easy to fall into the illusion of supposing that value is something actually contained in the individual commodity. For

example, it is easy to suppose that Marx means by value (as quite clearly he did *at one stage*) ‘the labour objectified in a commodity’, and then from there to proceed to the more general identification of labour with value which II Rubin quite correctly polemicised *against* (Rubin, 1972, p. 111 ff.). But Marx also makes it clear in Chapter One that this is not how he understands the matter. If value appears initially to be a ‘content’ concealed within its form of appearance, exchange-value, then this false appearance is plainly contradicted when he writes,

‘Political economy has indeed analysed value and its magnitude ... and has uncovered the content concealed *within these forms*. But it has never once asked the question why this content has assumed that particular form, *that is to say, why labour is represented in value (warum sich also die Arbeit im Wert ... darstellt)*.’ (*Capital*, I, p. 173-74. Translation slightly modified and emphasis mine.)

In this lucid sentence Marx calls value the *social form as such*..Let us look at this a bit more closely.

Outside of the purely vulgar and quite incorrect Ricardian understanding of Marx’s theory of value, which identifies value with the labour objectified in commodities, the usual mode of presentation of the theory in the Marxist literature is the one apparently started by F. Petry and typified in the expository accounts of Rubin, Sweezy and others. In this mode of presentation, the crucial architectural distinction within Marx’s value theory is its separation of ‘quantitative’ and ‘qualitative’ aspects in the problem of value. For example, Sweezy writes,

‘The great originality of Marx’s value theory lies in its recognition of these two elements of the problem.’ (Sweezy in Howard and King, 1976, p. 141 f.)

What *is* the ‘*qualitative aspect*’ of the problem of value, however? No sooner do we pose this question, than it becomes evident that the qualitative/quantitative distinction is *not enough* to render a proper account of Marx’s concept of value. Indeed, in the very passages where Marx himself refers to this distinction explicitly, he also says,

‘Ricardo’s mistake is that he is concerned only with the magnitude of value ... But the labour embodied in (commodities) *must be represented (dargestellt) as social labour* ... this qualitative aspect of the matter which is contained in the *representation of exchange-value as money (in der Darstellung des Tauschwertes als Geld)* is not elaborated by Ricardo ...’ (*Theories*, 3, p. 131).

Again, some pages later,

‘This necessity of representing individual labour as general labour is equivalent to the necessity of representing a commodity as money.’ (*Theories*, 3, p. 136, translation modified)

In passages such as these Marx isolates two dimensions of the value-process, (a) the representation of the commodity as money, and (b) the representation of (private) individual labour as social labour. The relation between these two dimensions can be described as follows: in the social process of exchange a surface relation, exchange-value, becomes the form of appearance of an inner relation, the relation which connects individual labour to the total social labour. (This connection is, in any case, what we might call a ‘material law of society’. Cf. *Selected Correspondence*, p. 239, p. 251, *Theories*, 1, p. 44.) The surface-relation is simultaneously a ‘relation among things’ and the inner relation a ‘relation among persons’. Finally, each of these two dimensions of the value-process is susceptible to the earlier-mentioned distinction into qualitative and quantitative aspects, so that the following structure results:

Dimension	(1) Quantitative	(2) Qualitative
(A) The commodity represented as money ...	exchange-value as surface appearance (<i>Section One</i>)	the money-form as objective appearance (<i>Section Three</i>)
(B) Individual labour represented as social labour ...	socially-necessary labour-time (<i>Sections One and Two</i>)	abstract labour (<i>Sections One and Two</i>)

When we look at Marx’s final presentation of Chapter One, the ‘substance of value’ and ‘magnitude of value’ aspects are taken together, investigated without any specific formal separation, in both of the first two Sections. This is so because, although separable as qualitative and quantitative aspects respectively, they belong to the same dimension of the value-process, the dimension of its inner content as a process within which individual labour is connected to and becomes part of total social labour. On the other hand, this ‘content’ is logically inseparable from its specific ‘form’; or to put the same thing differently, it only becomes something real *through its form*, which is the representation of the commodity as money. In its ‘immediate being’ the commodity is only a use-value, a point which Marx repeatedly makes in the *Critique*. Its immediate being is thus the commodity’s relation of self-repulsion, or its ‘negative’ relation to itself as a commodity (cf. *Science of Logic*, p. 168: ‘The negative relation of the one to itself is repulsion’.) The commodity can posit itself as a commodity-*value*, a product of *social* labour, only in a form in which it negates itself in its immediate being, hence only in a *mediated form*. This form is *money*. Only through the representation of the commodity *as money*, or, expressed more concretely, through the individual act of exchange, the transformation of the commodity into money, is individual labour *posited*

as social labour. The concept of value in Marx is constructed as the indestructible unity of these two dimensions, so that *logically it is impossible to understand Marx's theory of value except as his theory of money* (cf. Backhaus, 1975).⁴ This is the aspect developed explicitly in Section 3, the '*form of value*'. In Section 3, moreover, or in this return to the level of appearances, the contradictory determinations of the commodity, which appeared initially as mutually indifferent, become reabsorbed as a *unity* (money). In Marx's words,

'Use-value or the body of the commodity here plays a new role. It becomes ... the form of appearance of its own opposite. Instead of splitting apart, the contradictory determinations of the commodity here enter into a relation of mutual reflection' (cited Berger, 1974, p. 102, Zeleny, 1973, p. 78).'

The sequence of Marx's presentation is thus: $A(1) \rightarrow B \rightarrow A(2)$.

In Section 1 'exchange-value' figures as pure surface appearance (*Schein*), hence as a quantitative relation of commodities. But already within this section Marx accomplishes a transition to dimension B, whose two aspects (socially-necessary labour, and abstract labour) he then investigates, in this and the following section, without formal separation. Finally, in Section 3, Marx 'returns' to exchange-value, to dimension A, to deal with it no longer as the immediate illusory appearance of the exchange-process but as *objective* appearance, or *form*, *Erscheinung*.

(d) Value (Commodity-form) as the 'Self-evolving Substance'

In short, value is not labour and 'to develop the concept of capital it is necessary to begin not with labour but with value' (*Grundrisse*, p. 259), that is, with the twofold process by which individual labour becomes total labour through the reified appearance-form of the individual act of exchange (transformation of the commodity into money). Regarded as this twofold process of representation, the concept of value can then be formally defined as *the abstract and reified form of social labour*, and the term 'commodity-form of the product of labour' can be taken as its concrete-historical synonym. It is value, the commodity-form, in this definition, just outlined here, that composes the 'self developing substance' of Marx's entire investigation in *Capital*. As Marx says, value is

'the social form as such; its further development is therefore a further development of the social process that brings the commodity out onto the surface of society.'
(GKP p. 931)

Or value

‘contains the whole secret ... of all the bourgeois forms of the product of labour’.
(*Selected Correspondence*, p. 228)

The money-form of value (or money) is ‘the first form in which value’, social labour in abstract form ‘proceeds to the character of capital’ (*Grundrisse*, p. 259). So as the abstract-reified form of social labour, value ‘determines itself first as money, then as capital. In its money-form value obtains its sole form of appearance, and through this the moment of actuality. In its capital-form it *posits* itself as ‘living substance’, as a substance become ‘dominant subject’ (*Capital*, I, p. 255 f.), or *posits itself* as that totalising process which Hegel calls ‘essence’. Or, in the concept of value the analysis of the commodity arrives through its own movement at a basis for the dialectical-logical definition of capital.

At the moment of dialectical-logical derivation, this definition is only the most simple or abstract definition of capital. ‘If we speak here of capital, that is still merely a word (*ein Name*)’, Marx says.

‘The only aspect in which capital is here posited as distinct from (...) value and from money is that of (...) value which preserves and perpetuates itself in and through circulation.’ (*Grundrisse*, p. 262)

On the other hand, capital is here *posited*, or this moment of the determination of capital as a form of value is the initial moment of its positing, so that the ‘internal structure of production’ which ‘forms the second section’ (Part Three of Volume I) can now be investigated directly. This is the investigation which, as we know, occupies the major part of Volume I.

In Chapter One, Volume II, Marx *returns* to the process of circulation, or he comes back to the commodity. But now he can investigate the circulation of commodities directly as a circulation of *capital*. The formal determinations of simple circulation (commodity and money as means of circulation) are now posited as ‘aspects’, or forms of appearance, of the relations of production which initially they presupposed. Moreover, they are themselves posited as presupposed by capital, as forms essential to the process of realisation. In this spiral return to the point of departure the commodity is treated explicitly as a ‘depository of capital’ (*Results*, p. 975), as one of its ‘forms of existence’ within the process of circulation. ‘The independence of circulation’, the aspect in which the commodity initially presented itself to us, ‘is here reduced to a mere semblance’, that is, an illusory appearance (*Grundrisse*, p. 514).

The possibility of returning to the Sphere of Circulation and the necessity of now investigating it directly as a Circulation and, at first implicitly, a Reproduction of Capital signifies the conclusion of the first cycle of abstraction in *Capital*. However, as

we have seen, this cycle of abstraction is itself only possible because Chapter One (Volume I) takes us from the individual commodity to value. As we shall see, *both* are points of departure within the process of thought, but they are nonetheless quite distinct moments of this process. It is now possible to see that Colletti's exposition simply confuses these specific moments. It confuses the individual commodity as *immediate appearance* of the process of capital with value or the commodity-form as the *essential ground* of the movement that can finally posit the commodity as a moment, a form of appearance, of its own process. And because of this confusion intrinsic to his analysis, Colletti is forced to ascribe to the *commodity-form* logical properties that characterise the commodity as such. It is the commodity-form, or value, that Colletti calls 'secondary feature', 'subordinate element', 'non-essential aspect' and so on. He thereby reduces the method of conceptual development (the dialectical development of the concept of capital) to an incomprehensible mystery.

Against Colletti's fabrications, it is important to stress that in the theory of value Marx saw the whole basis for the distinction between himself and the tradition of classical economy. As he told Engels, moreover, 'the matter is too decisive for the whole book' (*Selected Correspondence*, p. 228). Which means quite simply that a correct understanding of the chapters that follow, and therefore, of course, our very ability to be able to develop the theory of Marx further, depends on a correct understanding of Chapter One.⁵ This is something that Lenin came over to seeing *after* reading the *Science of Logic*. Lenin's flexibility, however, his ability to reassess a problem, his burning restlessness, his capacity to swing from empiricism to Hegel, were only expressions of the fluid, practical mould of his thought. To be able to revise the foundations of your philosophical outlook within the space of three months, you must first be a person who *acts*, an *actor*. The demolition of the *Logic* is, however, Colletti's point of departure, and this proceeds not in a world of action, but within the unreal and immobilised world of the university.

Thus in its most simple and essential definition capital is a form of value where value itself is grasped as a form of social labour. From this it follows that when capital seeks to *overcome* or to *subordinate* the commodity-form of its own relations of production, to regulate the 'market' according to the combination of its individual wills (cf. Sohn-Rethel, 1975, p. 41 ff.), then it merely seeks to overcome or to subordinate *itself* as a form of value, or itself in its most essential definition. And this is impossible except as the *contradiction* which capital becomes.

The Double Structure of the Beginning

'If you compare the development from commodity to capital in Marx with development from Being to Essence in Hegel, you will get quite a good parallel ...' (Engels to Schmidt, 1.11.91).

In the previous section it was said that the commodity re-emerges as a ‘form of *existence*’ of capital at the start of Volume Two. We started with it, however, as capital in its immediate *being*. Translated into the terms of Hegel’s *Logic*, this implies that the movement of Volume One contains a decisive logical step from being to existence which Hegel and, following him, Marx call the ‘return into the ground’. The general principle of this retreat into the ground (into essence that *posits itself as such*),

‘means in general nothing else but: what *is*, is not to be taken for a positive immediacy (*seiendes Unmittelbares*) but as something posited.’ (*Science of Logic*, p. 446)

That is, being is not to be taken as immediate *in the sense of* un-mediated or lacking all mediation (cf. Henrich, 1971, p. 95 ff.).

‘Being is the immediate. Since knowledge has for its goal cognition of the true ... it does not stop at the immediate and its determinations, but penetrates it on the supposition that at the back of this being there is something else, something other than being itself, that this background constitutes the truth of being.’ (*Science of Logic*, p. 389. Translation modified in both passages.)

What is this hidden background? As we would expect, it is none other than essence. ‘The truth of being is essence’ (ibid.).

The terms in which Marx describes the transition from the individual commodity to capital are strikingly reminiscent of these and other passages of the *Logic*. Marx writes, Simple Circulation

‘does not carry within itself the principle of self-renewal. The moments of the latter (production) are presupposed to it, not posited by it. Commodities constantly have to be thrown into it anew from the outside, like fuel into a fire. Otherwise it flickers out in indifference ... Circulation, therefore, which appears as that which is immediately present on the surface of bourgeois society’,

which appears as its ‘immediate being’,

‘exists only insofar as it is constantly *mediated*. Looked at in itself, it is the mediation of presupposed extremes (i.e., the two commodities which begin and end the circuit). But it does not posit these extremes. Thus it has to be mediated not only in each of its moments, but as a whole of mediation, as a total process itself. Its immediate being is therefore pure semblance (*reiner Schein*). It is the appearance of a process taking place behind it ...’ (*Grundrisse*, p. 255, translation modified slightly.)

Through our analysis of the simple commodity we arrive at the concept of value and thus at a basis for defining, dialectico-logically, the concept of capital. Now it is capital that produces commodities which form the substance and lifeblood of the process of circulation. Therefore,

‘Circulation itself returns back into the activity which posits or produces exchange-values. *It returns into it as into its ground.*’ (Ibid. Emphasis mine.)

The ‘activity’ which forms the ‘ground’ of the process of circulation and into which it returns (in the sense explained above) is capital in its specific determination as a process of production. The immediate result of this process is the commodity ‘impregnated with surplus-value’ (*Results*, p. 975). So it is possible to say, as Hegel does, that the general course of a dialectical enquiry advances as

‘a retreat into the ground, into what is primary and true, on which depends and ... from which originates, that with which the beginning is made ... The ground ... is that from which the first proceeds, that which at first appeared as an immediacy.’ (*Science of Logic*, p. 71.)

The ‘first’, the commodity, proceeds from capital, whose own development posits it as a mediated immediacy, i.e. a ‘moment’ of its own process, hence something mediated. This enables us to say that Marx regarded *capital* as the ground of the movement of his investigation. However, it is through the analysis of the individual commodity that we *arrive at* this fundamental or ground category (capital). Therefore it is equally true to say that capital, the ground into which we retreat from circulation, from the individual commodity, is a *result*. And ‘in this respect the first’, the individual commodity, ‘is *equally the ground*’ (*Science of Logic*, p. 71, emphasis mine.).

This appears to jeopardise the whole argument, for it appears to ascribe to an immediate appearance (the individual commodity) the character and function of ‘ground’, that is, of a basis for the movement of the entire investigation. In fact, it is only this statement that finally enables us to reveal the true structure of every dialectical beginning.

About the beginning as such Hegel says at the end of the *Logic* that

‘its content is an immediate but an immediate that has the significance and form of *abstract universality*.’ (*Science of Logic*, p. 827)

Thus a dialectical beginning, such as Marx accomplished, contains two dimensions — a dimension of *immediacy* (of concreteness) and a dimension of *universality* (but the universal in its *abstract form*). As something universal, however, the latter *presupposes nothing* — except, Marx will say, the *historical process* through it has come about

(which is why ‘the dialectical form of presentation is only correct when it knows *its own limits*’, GKP p. 945). To say it ‘presupposes nothing’ except a historical process which lies ‘suspended’ within it (cf. *Grundrisse*, p. 460 f.) is to say that the universal which forms the ‘significance’ of the immediate-concrete that stands at the point of departure is something ‘absolute’, or related only to itself, ‘self-related’ (*Science of Logic*, p. 70, p. 404, p. 829). *As such*, as this ‘absolute’ which relates only to itself, the universal ‘counts as the *essence* of that immediate which forms the starting-point’ (*Science of Logic*, p. 405, emphasis mine).

Now we know that *capital* is the *essence* of the individual commodity (of simple circulation), it is its ‘ground’ or its ‘principle of self-renewal’, and the commodity is only a ‘moment’ of its process. On the other hand, capital itself is only the developed and self-developing form of *value*, or capital in its own simple definition is value-in-process (*Grundrisse*, p. 536), *value* as the dominant subject, etc. So value is *likewise* the essence of the simple commodity, and the difference can then be put like this: as the merely *abstract, universal form of capital* (cf. *Grundrisse*, p. 776, *Capital*, I, p. 174, note), value can be called the ‘abstract essence’ of the simple commodity; the *posited* form of value, can be called its ‘concrete essence’. Or, capital is only the essence of the simple commodity because *value is its own essence*, the essence of capital, for capital is a *form* of value. Finally, as the immediate aspect of *value*, which is its abstract essence, the commodity which forms the starting-point can also be called the ground of the entire movement.

In fact, there is a much clearer form in which this point can be made, as long as it is seen as a statement about the structure of the beginning. Namely, *the beginning is a movement between two points of departure*. (This is what ninety-nine percent of commentators fail to grasp). As the immediate appearance of the total process of capital (this can also be called *value as a totality reflected-into-itself* for all categories of capital are categories of value), the individual commodity forms the *analytic* point of departure. From this, however, we do not pass over directly to the concept of capital. By analysing the commodity, drawing out its determinations, we arrive at the concept of *value* as the abstract-reified form of social labour. This as the ground of all further conceptual determinations (money, capital) forms the *synthetic* point of departure of *Capital*. (The distinction is clearly understood and explicitly stated by Berger, 1974, p. 86.) The passage from one point to the other forms the structure of the beginning as such. In logical terms this movement is a transition from Immediacy to Mediation, or from Being to Essence. Analysis is simply a prelude, as Marx points out, even if a necessary one, to the process that he calls ‘genetic presentation’ (*genetische Darstellung*) (*Theories*, 3, p. 500). This process is one we have been concerned with through most of this essay. It is the logically continuous movement from the abstract to the concrete, the movement that Hegel calls ‘the development of form’, the movement

that Marx describes as ‘the principle entering into appearance’, or as the development of the different forms through their inner genesis.

In the dialectical method of development the movement from abstract to concrete is not a straight-line process. One returns to the concrete at expanded levels of the total curve, reconstructing the surface of society by ‘stages’, as a structure of several dimensions (cf. Hochberger, 1974, p. 155 f., p. 166 f.). And this implies, finally, that in Marx’s *Capital* we shall find a continuous ‘oscillation between essence and appearance’ (Zeleny, 1973, p. 164 ff.). Yet there is a point at which this movement, the very development of the concept of capital, breaks down in *Capital* as we have it today. There is a point at which the ‘form of enquiry’ is no longer reflected back to us in the dialectically perfected shape of a ‘method of presentation’. To say this is only to say that Marx’s *Capital* remains incomplete as a reproduction of the concrete in thought. What is remarkable here is not that Marx should have left the book incomplete but that close to four generations of Marxists should have done so. There are, of course, historical reasons why this is so, reasons related to the renovated expansion and qualitative consolidation of capitalism. But one of the most striking manifestations of the underlying crisis in the movement as a whole is the contemporary state of Western Marxism — the ecstatic leap from the uppermost floors of an imposing skyscraper of immobilised dogma to the granite pavements of confused eclecticism.

Footnotes

Wherever possible I have consulted the original of all passages cited from Marx’s writings or from Hegel’s Preface to the *Phenomenology*, or from his *Logic*. Thus where existing translations have been modified, it is, of course, only after consultation of the original German text (the *MEW* edition in Marx’s case, and the twenty-volume Frankfurt edition in Hegel’s).

1. Della Volpe, like Popper, was fundamentally concerned with the ‘demarcation problem’, the problem of establishing criteria in terms of which science might be distinguished from metaphysics, e.g. Marx from Hegel (for Della Volpe), or Einstein from Marx (for Popper). Like Popper, Della Volpe saw the hallmark of ‘scientific method’ in the subordination of our rational constructions to the test of ‘experience’. Like Popper, Della Volpe argued that ‘experience’ could play this role only ‘negatively’, or as falsification (Della Volpe, 1969, p. 171 f.). Like Popper, finally, he came to see theories or laws as purely tentative, or conjectural or intrinsically ‘corrigible’ (Della Volpe, 1969, p. 184, p. 186, p. 201). Where, then, can we locate the difference between Marxism and a tradition like Positivism, say? In the fact that Positivism is characterised, for Della Volpe, by its ‘worship of facts and repugnance towards hypothesis’ (1969, p. 205) — an argument that might have carried conviction in the heyday of Logical Positivism, but certainly does not today.

Perhaps it should be stated here that throughout this essay, a minimal presupposition is the critique of empiricism elaborated in some of the recent philosophy of science, notably, by Wartofsky 1967, Feyerabend 19701, Feyerabend 19702, and Koyre, 1968.

2. It is worth emphasising here that the reaction against Hegel in Western Marxism went *side by side* with the revival of a systematic, scholarly interest in Hegel and the ‘logic of *Capital*’ in post-Stalinist Eastern Europe. Notable representatives of this tendency, whose work has still to be translated into English, are E V Ilyenkov 1960, M Rozental 1957 and J Zeleny 1973 (originally 1962). This body of work and interpretation, together with that done by Rosdolsky 1968, Reichelt 1973, Backhaus 1975 and others *decisively refutes* the quite shallow nonsense which asserts that ‘Hegel’s influence on Marx was *largely terminological*’ (Sowell, 1976, p. 54). When Marx refers to his ‘flirtation’ with Hegel’s ‘mode of expression’ (*Capital*, I, p. 103), he is referring only to the *densely Hegelian* flavour and quality of the 1867 version of Chapter One. Many of the explicit references to the *Logic* which this version contained, and which, from the point of view of the *presentation* of the argument, were quite irrelevant, were subsequently eliminated by Marx in his reworking of the chapter. For example, the 1867 version contains this sentence: ‘This form is rather difficult to analyse because it is simple. It is in a sense the cell form, *or, as Hegel would say, the ‘in itself’ of money.*’ (cited Zeleny, 1973, p. 78). This was the kind of thing that Marx removed in his reworking.

3. The idea that Marx starts with a ‘pre-capitalist’ commodity is very widespread among those who read *Capital* without the faintest conception of its method. It is shared by de Brunhoff 1973, for she tells us that ‘exchange value ... is first conceived at the level of a commodity production which is *not specific to any particular mode of production*’ (p. 424). This is probably the only *substantive*, non-obvious point made in the article, which is no accident, because de Brunhoff starts off by asserting that ‘the articulation between commodity and capital must be reviewed ... *without using a Hegelian method*, which I *think*, following *Althusser’s* demonstrations, is *profoundly alien* to Marx’s procedure in *Capital*’ (p. 422, emphases mine). For Althusser see note 5 below.

4. In this sense Zeleny (1973, chapter six) is right in arguing that the ‘dialectical-logical derivation of the *money-form* of value’ composes ‘the *whole* of chapter one (not only the section on the individual forms of value)’ (p. 91). While this is perfectly true in the specific sense that Marx’s theory of value cannot be understood except as a theory of money, it is also the case that Marx’s particular presentation, even in its revised form, tends to obscure this fact, so that it is not difficult to suppose, as Rubin (1975 p. 36) wrongly does, that we can actually discuss value without discussing money. For criticisms of Marx see Itoh 1976.

5. This is a point we should make even more strongly against Althusser, who, in attempting to divorce the ‘theory of fetishism’, the conception of value as a *reified* form of social labour, from the theory of value, as if these were separate aspects, simply endorses the crude positivism of Joan Robinson and others who find the ‘metaphysics’ of Chapter One irreconcilable with the naturally superior claims of good common-sense. Joining the camp of positivism, Althusser inevitably *finds it quite impossible to understand Chapter One*, as he confesses, indirectly, to the French readers of Marx. In his characteristically sanctimonious tone, he writes,

‘I therefore give the following advice: put the whole of Part One aside for the time being and begin your reading with Part Two ... In my opinion, it is impossible to begin (even to begin) to understand Part One until you have read and re-read the whole of Volume I, starting with Part Two.’ (Althusser, 1971, p. 79)

Of course, Althusser does not bother to explain to his readers, the readers of *Capital*, *why* they should find it any easier to understand Chapter One after reading the rest of the Volume. It seems as if Marx wrote the bulk of the volume to throw light on its introductory chapter, and not precisely the other way round! Or perhaps we are dealing with one of those famous ‘inversions’?

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